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ABSTRACT

Internal, external and managerial functions of husband and wife, father and mother, and child sub-systems of the nuclear family are identified and discussed. The process of becoming a family is explored. In characterizing an optimally functioning family, emphasis is placed on the ability of family members to negotiate and resolve their roles, organize their family, and manage their organization with maximal satisfaction. The importance of communication between family members, need for maintaining one another's identities, need for connection with friends and kin, and the internalization of the parents' parenting practices by the child are accented. Opinions about the future of marriage, whether troubled spouses should divorce or stay together, and the importance of communication are stated. (Author/RH)

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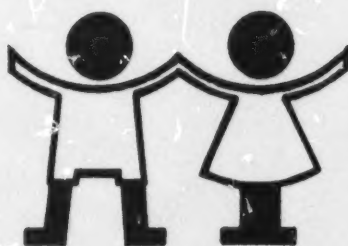
Unit for Child Studies

Number 3

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FAMILY SYSTEMS - DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT
DR PETER CHURVEN

FAMILY SYSTEMS - DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT

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My interest in families comes from working with children in trouble. Originally, I started out with the values that are common in our society, and in our profession, that the emphasis should be on individuals. People are held accountable as individuals. If children are disturbed, then it is commonly believed that the problem lies with the child as an individual. Thus, the parents come to the child psychiatrist or the social worker for help in the same way they go along to the family doctor to have the child's bronchitis attended to for some "magic" injection.

One of the problems with the individual model is that the parents feel that it is the child alone who is in trouble; the child is the "sick one" and the doctor can fix things by concentrating on the child. Then, the doctor takes a history of the child's growing up: it unfolds that the parents were divorced when the child was two; mother remarried when the child was three, and the child was placed in day care. Mum says she now realises that the day care mother was not very good and the doctor and mother start to think it is not the child's fault. It now becomes *mother's* fault - another individual problem. So the mother starts feeling extremely guilty and says "It's my fault!", and wants to spend the next twenty sessions being upset about how she has done all these terrible things to her child.

These effects and emotions are partly a product of the dominant individualistic ethic and its impact upon people's attitudes to their children. Fortunately, through the world of business, we have recently been handed an alternative view, which, I believe, relieves us of some of the problems. It is this alternative view that I would like to explore a little. This alternative view is on the *relationship between things*; not on the individuals but on the relationship between them. When you consider both the joys of bringing up children, and the problems that sometimes arise, I think it is fruitful to look at the relationship *between* members of the family when trying to explain and plan solutions to the problems that arise. I speak of the family - *all* members of the family, not just the mother and the child.

Whereas Dr. Graeme Russell (a previous speaker) emphasised the potential role of fathers (and that's probably a good thing), I want to take a more pragmatic point of view. Rather than put up a model of how you ought to be, I would like to help you examine how you became a family. Let's take a couple as an example.

(At this stage, Dr. Churven called for a couple to come from the audience. Hans and Katy volunteered. The rest of the talk is based on their answers which are omitted from the transcript.)

Hans and Katy do not yet constitute a family. They are at a point in their lives of being a married couple, and later on, I hope, we will give them some children. Hans states they got together through physical, sexual attraction, and that they can talk together. Now, talking together is very important for couples for many reasons so we can say that they can communicate. For Katy also, there was a sexual attraction and she says that Hans had a sense of knowing where he was going. Hans states that Katy is understanding. I think what

they are talking about is "identity".

Identity is not an individual quality. Identity is something that people maintain in each other. It is quite obvious when you read about war horrors - that it is easy to break down identity in prisoners-of-war camps. One of the favourite ways of breaking down identity, is to isolate people. One aspect of marriage that is not always given due credit, is the need of a couple to maintain each other's identity; these two are putting it forward as actually one of the germinal reasons why they were attracted in the first place.

Hans and Katy met because they worked (in a school) together. They had another quality that presumably enabled them to get married - they were both earning an income. How long was it after the courtship before they married? Was it very long? Perhaps two-and-a-half years. During this time they were getting to know each other: whether they fitted together; whether they were going to last together; was it infatuation? Infatuation - is that what most people call love? What about this notion of love? Was that one of the reasons they married - because they loved each other?

At the moment they tell us that they *love each other*, that they have a *sexual relationship*, and that they maintain *each other's identity*. These are home things. They presumably earn their income outside the home, so these are external things. I have drawn a diagram of these things, or functions, on the board. Communication is basic because even to get to know each other, or to go out to dinner together, you have to communicate.

Looking at the things we have so far - love, sex, identity, income, and communication. There are other important functions that have to be performed, to survive. At home we also cook and eat. We have a car and sometimes have to wash it. We have a dog, too. So we have a lot of domestic functions to perform. Who, in fact, does the cooking at your place? Do you share and share alike? These functions are something they share responsibility for. They are not functions of either individual.

Next, one needs friends. Do Hans and Katy have a lot of friends? Do they spend a lot of time with them? Do they have family that they often visit? Why do they see so much of the family? Perhaps Katy's sister is her best friend and they have much to explore - differences as well as things in common. There are other family members too. They have *kinship ties*. This couple's relationship - counting courtship as well - has been going for twelve years, so it is a fairly solid relationship. However, this relationship of the couple is not enough. They need outside friendships and kinship networks to maintain each other's identity and affection, and of course, they have to go outside to earn money.

Do this couple, Hans and Katy, want to go on and become a family? My definition of a family is a collection of dependent children and their consistent, caring adults that live together. Now, my definition of family is not concerned with whether or not people are married, or whether or not they are single parents, or whether or not they are both homosexual or heterosexual, or whatever. Some groups want to promote a Christian family, and that's fine; other groups want to promote father nurturing children, and that's fine, too; but I want a general definition of family that does not exclude any particular religious or other group. It is a general definition that I use because, to me, the essence of family is child-rearing: a married couple only becomes a family when children are added. That is not to suggest for one moment that they can not survive as a married couple without children.

Now, we add some children to this family. We will call them Sue and George. George is 12 and Sue is 5½. Our family has spaced its children very well. They have had a long courtship and are very thoughtful about everything.

So now we have a family and we have a father and a mother. They have added to their husband/wife roles, their love and sex, and so on, by becoming parents. I want to point out that the husband/wife roles are the basis to which the family roles are added. Now, one of the things that happens, of course, in families, is that they get along fine as a married couple, but when they have children they sometimes break up because somehow, becoming a father and a mother detracts from their basic husband/wife functions. If the husband/wife functions are not reasonably solid it is very hard to perform the others.

What do you think the children need most from their parents? I don't mean material things. The father, Hans, says that he thinks the first thing that he and the mother have to do is love the children. George says that he loves his parents too. And, of course, Sue being 5 would love her parents. The children have the function of loving the parents, and the parents the children. What else do the children want from them? They want attention and time; talking over things, reading things; they need to be fed. Children want to be loved; they want an environment that will stimulate them intellectually and emotionally. To nurture children means to *nurture them intellectually, emotionally and socially.*

Security comes out of effective nurturing by the parents and effective physical intellectual and emotional development responses from the children. Security is a goal, it is not a function in itself. How can children be secure? They can only be secure through being able to rely on their parent's promises rather than being let down. Security builds up out of the other functions.

Parents may also be involved outside the home: perhaps they go to the P & C and other meetings and events. When you become parents you generally add external community functions to your life. You need support as a parent through playgroups and so on. What about the children? What do they do during the day? In school-age children, the equivalent of work is to go to school.

To me, these are the main functions of a family. They are the basic functions out of which these other things like security, arise. But I ask you, how on earth, over a period of twelve years as a married couple, and now twelve years as a family (because George is twelve), have they achieved all these things? Even the aspect of how much father should do towards child-rearing took an hour's exploration by the last speaker - and he is a professional. There are all these things they have to do. How is it sorted out? You can look at it many ways.

The people I see with problems come to me and say: "The problem is that he does not love me" or "She won't sleep with me" or "The kid won't obey me". This sort of issue. The problems are almost always presented in terms of these functions. Yet there are notions that if you love each other enough you'll have a happy family. Unfortunately, there are plenty of families that love each other a lot, but they are still not too happy. What is missing from all this? What is the purpose of it all?

Another way to talk about purpose is to talk about goals or objectives. It is helpful to look at a family - any family - as an organisation, not as something that is supposed to operate in great paroxysms of love twenty-four hours a day! In this organisation people have different needs, at different times, and are pursuing different goals. Somehow this intermeshing has to be worked out. I think, the best way to think about this is to think of it as management. I believe a family is an organisation, and organisations fail if they do not have management. I was recently struck - reading in the National Times about defence problems - by a very trenchant article pointing out that the biggest single problem with Australian defence was a failure in planning, a failure in management. It is not good enough to say "I want F-111's" or "I don't want F-111's".

The question is to have the mechanism, to have the processes, to make those choices. It is not good enough for Dad to say "I think the children should be disciplined" and Mother to say "Well, I was brought up easy, I'm all right, and I'm going to bring up my children the same way." It is not that those attitudes in themselves are right or wrong. Where families get into trouble is that they do not have the mechanisms for resolving the differences: a useful way to look at that resolution is to look at it in terms of family management - which includes communication.

Goals are also very important. If you take a basic business management plan, the first thing that needs to be established is the corporation's goals. In Hans' and Katy's two-and-a-half year courtship, they were able to establish that their marital corporation had common goals. The more areas you can have with common goals the better - but you need two or three key areas that you agree on. Once this is done, they have to work out how to achieve them. I would suggest to you, that that is done through the management model.

The management model that is generally used in business organisations is that the overall goals are established and the constraints of the situation are looked at: it is no good people making demands of each other that go beyond the capacity to satisfy them. If you like sailing, as I do, and if your wife hates sailing, and mine does, that is a constraint on our family recreational activities, and has to be negotiated. So you have constraints and you have resources - the money you earn, the amount of affection you have, your physical health. The next job is to organise the plan in detail. Normally, in an organisation, you staff the organisation to fulfil the detailed plans and then direct the organisation to make sure it carries out the goals you agreed upon. Now, of course, in a conventional family, the only staffing functions can be having children, or getting divorced and restaffing that way. So, staffing does not really apply; I suggest that all the other functions apply to families as well as to businesses. The most fruitful area of endeavour in resolving family difficulties, and certainly in helping clients, is to look at the area of management.

I put it to you that the major superordinate function for all other family activity is a managerial function, and that the most helpful approach that I can see in helping families in difficulties, including the difficulties of child-rearing, is to help them to look at their managerial functions, particularly, their problem-solving functions. This is vital because all families always change. They change for two reasons. One: the children grow up and the parents become older. Now, whatever else you do, that is going to change you; that is called a developmental crisis. The ultimate developmental crises are ones of loss, children growing up and leaving home (as George would do in a few years). The final crisis, of course, is the ultimate death of the marital couple while the children go on to recycle the whole process again. These are developmental crises. Then, there are accidental crises like illness, people thrown out of work and a family losing its income, and so on. In most societies, in most eras, there are many external pressures. These external pressures just amplify, and further strengthen the need for effective managerial functions.

The main point that I want to make, is that the issue is not one of whether husbands should or should not wash up, whether women should or should not be liberated, but that a couple and a family can negotiate and resolve their roles, organise their family, and manage their organisation with maximal satisfaction. This model applies equally to single parent families, except that with a single parent family, clearly the one remaining parent has to take on all those functions and has to seek alternative means of support. This model is not an attack on single parent families, but it does give some indication of the stresses that they undergo.

Many people would say that this nuclear family that we are looking at here, is non-viable. That, in fact, there is too much expected of it and that the family must have external support. The model does take into account external support under the "friends" and "community". I think that the nuclear family is viable, providing it has these community supports, friendships, and kinship networks. If the nuclear family becomes isolated, I would agree that it gets into great difficulties.

There is a question as to whether, in accordance with these management notions, and with changing functions over the years, parents and couples do not need retraining. Of course, there are movements aimed at things like parent education groups. The intensity of interaction within a family is so strong that it is very difficult to deal with these issues through education: for people that are basically going well, acquiring more information is fine; it is not enough in more serious situations. This is because people learn their parental functions basically as children. When the members in a family system are performing their child functions, they are a mirror image of the parent functions; ideally, the parents should provide a secure environment and love the child, and the environment should allow him or her to physically, intellectually, and emotionally grow up. Similarly, the child should, in such an environment, love his or her parents, and physically, emotionally, and intellectually develop.

Now, in that process the child does not just become grown-up - he learns to be a parent. The power of that teaching is so great that it is very hard to alter. It is very difficult to take people who have not had the experience of a good childhood, and then try to teach them, intellectually, to be parents. It is only the support of friends, grandmothers, and health care systems, during child-rearing, that can affect the next generation.

QUESTIONS:

Q. What is the future of marriage?

What do I think about the future of marriage? My interest in this is a clinical point of view dealing with the limited numbers of families who want help. My understanding of societal issues is probably no greater than your own. My personal opinion is that marriage is a great success and more people are marrying every day, which seems to compensate for the large numbers of divorces. So, it seems to me, that more people are marrying, more people are divorcing, and marriage is alive and well in terms of the ultimate numbers, but, in other terms, there is a lot of retraining going on,

Q. Is it better to divorce than stay together?

In my approach to families, I deliberately avoid the answers to questions like that. We know that children can survive divorce. We also know that plenty of conflicting couples can, nevertheless, bring up fairly reasonable children. So, I do not see that we have any evidence either way. Even if the statistical data were available over what happens to one thousand children in five thousand divorces - *it does not tell us what to do, in this case, now*. If a couple are contemplating divorce, and you know that divorce puts children at risk, and you also know that chronic marital discord puts children at risk, are they going to be in the percentage of children who do well out of divorce or badly?

So, I think, the best we can do is to assist people to sit down and face up to the issues. And the issues are what is going on in *this husband/wife* relationship, what is going on in *this parent/child* relationship; how they can fulfil the functions of both. I personally think that it is possible to have a successful divorce. Although I have not met that challenge as an individual, I have

seen many who have. I think it depends on taking the managerial perspective - whether the children are to be the "meat in the sandwich", whether the couple can be helped, or can themselves confront the issue that they can not live together. I can not answer whether it is good or bad; just that parents should be facilitated to look at the issues - their husband/wife issues, and the parent issues, and be helped to make a reasonable decision.

Similarly, people ask is it good for fathers to go on seeing the children after divorce in the case where the mother has custody? If the mother has the children, it is the trendy thing that all the fathers visit once a week or once a month, and take them out for a couple of hours and then bring them back. Everyone says this is fine. Unlike the old days where fathers disappeared, now the fathers go on seeing their children, and this is said to be "good". It is not necessarily "good"! There are plenty of fathers who hate it. They only do it to irritate their wives, or their ex-wives; the children hate it because they *know* their father is only doing it to irritate their mother - and they don't like the brand of icecream he buys them anyway! This is not "good". It would be better if the father sent the child a Christmas and a Birthday card, and then, when the child was six years old, came up shook his hand and said: "Hello, I'm your father", or some such statement. Continuity, knowing who your father is, is important. That does not mean going out with him and hating every minute of it. There are no absolutes. There is only the best compromise in a particular situation.

Q. How important is communication?

I have been asked how important is communication. It is very important, but communication - or lack of it - becomes identified as the problem and it becomes trendy and useless. It has reached the stage where people doing family and marital counselling are quite used to the phenomenon of a couple or a family coming along and saying: "We have a communication problem". They then spend an hour intellectualising about their communication problem and whether or not they like the tone of each other's voice and so on. Why do you communicate? You communicate because you want to. Why do you want to? Because you were physically attracted to each other? When Katy does not like the way Hans swears all the time, she says: "Listen, I love talking to you darling, but I do wish you would stop saying so-and-so". He stops because he is motivated, so there is an interdependence. The ones who always want to come and discuss communication, probably need to talk about something else, and the ones who want to talk about their sex lives probably need to talk about communication. Communication is a basic tool for fulfilment of the other functions. They are *all* important.

SEMINAR, The University of New South Wales
February 24th, 25th, 1979.
FATHERS, MOTHERS AND CHILD WATCHERS

FAMILY MANAGEMENT CHART USED DURING SEMINAR

Functional sub-systems	Internal functions	External functions	Managerial functions
MARITAL (Husband and wife)	Emotional interactions Sexual interactions Social interactions Domestic chores	Economic maintenance Social interactions - friends and family	COMMUNICATION ALLOCATION OF FUNCTIONS
PARENT (Father and Mother)	Attach to Children Nurture Children - emotionally - physically - intellectually - socially	Parental support network	PROBLEM SOLVING ADAPTATION TO CHANGE
CHILD	Attach to parents Develop - emotionally - physically - intellectually - socially	Friendship network Education (formal)	